

DOING TIME

FINDING FREEDOM BEHIND BARS

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by Timothy Cross

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I was working as a chaplain in a psychiatric, drug rehab hospital. There was a teenage boy who was driving me crazy. He was destroying my groups. One day I had an idea. I said, “Billy, I’ve got a gift for you,” and I held out a one dollar bill. I said, “Here, this is yours.”—He said, “What’s the catch?” I said “Nothing. It’s yours.” Finally, he came up to the front of the group and took the dollar. I said, “You can be seated now.” He looked at me with a puzzled look, like, “Man, what’s up?”

I said, “Billy, if I had a thousand dollars, would you receive it?” His eyes got big, and he said, “Yeah.” I then asked him, “If I had a gift greater than a thousand dollars, would you receive it?” He asked, “What is it?” I told him that knowing God was far greater than a thousand dollars, but that I couldn’t shove God down his throat. I offered him a choice. He could stay in the group and receive the gifts I had to offer, or I’d let him leave without getting in trouble. He thought it over, and decided to stay. From then on we got along great.

A couple of weeks later he stole a kitchen knife, and threatened an escape. He was taken from the hospital and placed in a juvenile detention center. Before he left, he offered to give me the dollar back. I said, “No, it’s yours.” A year later, I heard that he had gotten off drugs, had turned his life over to God, and was going straight.

Like Billy, I’ve got some good news for you, if you are willing to receive it. I’m not writing to judge you, or to preach to you, but I am writing to make you *think*. Before you write me off as another one of those ##**!# Christians, will you at least read what I have to say. It is my belief that the only one who can give lasting happiness is God. Maybe you don’t believe in God, or maybe you’re mad at God because life has been unfair to you.

From where I am sitting, you have a lot to gain by finding out the truth about God, and little to lose. If you decide there is no God, then screw life. On the other hand, if there is a God, and you find God, then you just won your freedom; if not in this life, then in the next.

Once upon a time, two prisoners looked out of their jail windows at night. One saw mud. The other saw the stars. The question is, “What are you seeing?” You may be locked up, but is your spirit free? What I have to say may not get you out of jail or prison any sooner, but I can help you find peace, hope, and freedom.

If you really want to know the truth about God, and you are willing to follow the truth once you find it, I believe God longs to show you. The question is, “Are you willing to be shown?” God reveals his truth to those with an open heart.

LIFE IN PRISON

As I visit inmates and get letters from prisoners, they often tell me how lonely, sad, and without hope they feel. I know prison life stinks. I also know many prisoners are in prison partly because of rotten childhoods. You may have already had two strikes on you before you got up to bat in the game of life.—My heart aches for you if that is the case. Having worked in psych hospitals and treatment centers for ten years, I have just about heard of every kind of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse you can think of. I have also worked with felons, gang members, Satanists, sexual offenders, addicts, psychotics [mentally zoned out], etc. I'll be the first to admit that life is not always fair.

Hurt people hurt other people. If you have been deeply hurt, you have probably hurt others out of your feelings of anger and frustration. People with needs [such as love, belonging, being respected] always try to get their needs met, either the right way, or the wrong way. Prisons are full of people who chose the wrong way of getting the right needs met.

Why should you consider God? Because only God is big enough to put out the fire of your anger and heal your deepest hurts.

Do you feel guilt and sadness over the people you have hurt? With God there is also forgiveness.

Once, at a psych hospital where I worked, I was playing pool with a teenager who had been in Satanism. The two of us were alone. He grew very quiet, looked up at me, and asked, "Can God ever forgive me because I was present when we killed a baby, and we ate it?"—After I caught my breath, I answered, "If God is big enough to forgive us for the death of Jesus, he is big enough to forgive you for the death of that baby." A few minutes later this young man asked God to forgive him, and prayed for Jesus Christ to come into his life.—His life changed.

Regardless of what you have done, there is *hope* and *forgiveness*. If you have a history of being abused: physically, sexually, or emotionally, there is *healing*. God is not abusive. God hates the crap and evil in our world, and someday he will judge the world for its evil.

A GOD WHO ALLOWS ABUSE?

People who have been abused often blame God for their abuse, and the painful lives they've lived. So, why does he allow evil and abuse? There are no easy answers, but maybe the following illustration will help.

Pretend there is an ugly, smelly, mud puddle. Beside the mud puddle is a sign, placed by God, which says, "Don't walk through mud puddles."

Let's say some jerk has a bad-hair day, he runs into the mud puddle, and he splashes mud all over you.—Got the picture? That mud puddle is like real life. When people break God's law, three things happen: (1) they become guilty before God, and they need to be pardoned or else they will suffer the consequences, (2) they get dirty and they need to get cleaned up (which may take a lifetime), and (3) sometimes innocent people (like you) get splashed on.

What if you are the guy who got splashed on [abused]? How are you feeling? You're probably struggling with anger, rage, depression, feelings of loss, and feeling dirty. [Abuse victims often feel dirty and unclean on the inside.] Is it God's fault the man ran into the mud puddle? Is God to blame that you were abused? No. God clearly told him, "Don't run through the mud puddle." If you're going to be mad at someone, you should be mad at the person who disobeyed God and splashed on you. Or, you should be mad at Satan for whispering in the man's ear to disobey God.

Are you mad at God because he didn't stop the guy from running into the mud puddle? Why did God allow him to splash mud on you?—Because, if God stopped him, God would be taking away the man's free will, his right to make his own choices in life.

According to the Bible, when God made man, God gave mankind the power to choose good or evil. God didn't make us like robots, like some machine that could only act a certain way. Without free will there can't be real love. God warns us not to walk through life's mud puddles, but he doesn't stop us. He gives us the power of choice. We can obey or disobey. We can choose to love and serve him, or we can go our own selfish ways. Sadly, the first man and woman [Adam

and Eve] chose to go their own way. As a result, evil, pain, and heartbreak entered the world. Mankind has been walking through mud puddles ever since, and yes, even children get splashed on and abused. Is that God's fault? No. Either God would have to take away our free will, or else he would have to allow mankind to choose evil. We can choose to obey God or not obey God. We can choose to walk around the mud puddles, or we can choose to walk through the mud puddles. We can love God or spit in his face.—The choice is ours.

The good news is that God has been on a search and rescue mission for mankind ever since they chose to walk through the first mud puddle. He seeks those who are dirty, and those who are stuck in mud puddles. He offers them a way out. He offers forgiveness, just as if they never walked through the mud puddle. And not only that, God is willing to give us his Spirit to live within us to help us wash the mud off.

You've been splashed on, and you've splashed others. We have all gone through our mud puddles. Maybe you were splashed on so much as a child that you thought, "What the hell, I'm already dirty, I might as well splash on others to get even." Or, maybe, you were so angry you couldn't see straight, and you didn't care that the mud puddle was right in front of you, and you splashed through it anyway. Either way, you are guilty, you got dirty, you need to be forgiven, and you need to clean up your life.

Let me tell you a true story. A few years ago some very good friends of mine who lived in Nebraska came for a visit. They had several kids. One of their boys, whom I'll call John, was one of the cutest kids I'd ever seen. He had bright blue eyes, and a smile that could light up a room. A couple of years later John became very ill with a temperature of 105 degrees. His parents took him to the emergency room. Whether the doctor was drunk, or on drugs, or just having a bad day, the parents don't know. The doctor was rude, told them to take John home and give him some aspirin; that if he wasn't better, to bring him back the next day. Rather than question the doctor, they did as they were told.

As it turned out, John had spinal meningitis, and, because the doctor didn't catch it, John is 100% deaf today.—My heart broke when I heard the news. I don't cry easily, but tears filled my eyes. I began telling God how unfair it was. I told God that John would never hear his parents say, "I love you." He will never again hear the sounds of music, or of birds singing in the spring. I said, "Lord, even if you gave John another whole life, it wouldn't pay back all that John has lost."—Then, I had a very real sense that God was speaking to me, "I have all eternity [time which never ends] to pay John back for his losses."

Was John a victim? You bet. Do you suppose John has ever felt angry, that life is unfair? Sure. Would you blame him if he took out his anger on others? While it wouldn't be right, you could understand why he might.

"And what about John today?" He still remains deaf. However, his parents have started helping other deaf kids. Though John's illness has been very hard, good things have happened as a result of John's deafness. God has brought good out of all their pain. He can do the same for you.

Does God care about John? Of course. So, what was wrong with my thinking? I was thinking only of *time* here on earth. God has *forever* to pay us back for the wrongs done to us in this life. In the Bible, the apostle Paul was a man who spent a lot of his time in prison, because he was a follower of Jesus. Paul said, "The sufferings of this life are not worth comparing to the glory [neat stuff] that will be revealed to us." [Romans 8:18] His life ended when Nero, emperor of Rome, had his head chopped off. Life was anything but fair to Paul.

If you have known great hurts and great losses in life, God has all of time and eternity to pay you back. If I could give you a gift, besides knowing God, it would be for you to begin looking at life in light of eternity.

What do I mean?—Think of a piece of chalk the size of a large telephone pole (50-60 feet tall) and a chalkboard hundreds of miles long. Pretend you take the chalk, and draw a thin line which goes and goes until the chalk runs out. Think of this as a time-line which goes forever. Now, imagine that you put a tiny dot at the front end of that line, and let it represent your whole life

here on earth, compared to eternity. Does it matter whether God exists?—You bet.

If there is no God you might as well erase the time-line, because when you die, the party is over. On the other hand, if God is real, and there is an afterlife, then nothing on earth could be more important than where you spend eternity. All the pain of this life is but a split second compared to eternity. Even a life sentence in prison is as nothing compared to *eternity*. You are at the beginning of forever. A million years from now, if you are with God, what difference will a few years in prison have made?

Getting out of prison, having a family, fighting AIDS, making money, even having sex, are nothing compared to what faces you after death. You are one breath, one heartbeat, one bullet, one electric chair away from eternity. When you die, you will face never-ending life of some sort. The most important decision you will make in this life is, “What will I do with God?”

Janis Joplin, famous rock star who died of a drug overdose in the 1960’s, said, “Take good care of your future, because that is where you are going to spend the rest of your life.” One hundred years from now your body may be rotting in some grave, but your spirit will be still be alive. While you may, or may not, get out of prison, your spirit can be free; not only now, but for all eternity. If you know God and belong to his family, when death comes, you will go from the prison of this life to a palace, from having nothing to having everything. Sadness will turn into shouts of joy. C.S. Lewis said, “Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”

God offers you a way out of the hell-hole you may be in.

I had a 16 year-old come up to me after one of my groups and say, “Do you know the thing I don’t like about your groups?”—I said, “No.”—He said, “You make me think.” Four months later, this young man got into an argument with his dad, went down to his basement, put a rope around his neck, and hung himself. They found scuff marks all over the wall where he tried to get free, but couldn’t.—I wept for him. What a waste! If only he had known that God was there for him. “If only . . .”

Please don’t be like him. You can turn me off and say I’m crazy, or you can honestly seek God.

Jesus told a story which has come to be known as, “The Parable Of The Prodigal Son.” It is a story about a son who leaves home and screws up his life with wild women and wild living. With time, he hits bottom: no money, no food, depressed. Having lost everything, he decides to go home and beg his dad to take him back as a servant. When the father [God] sees his son returning home, he runs to the son, hugs him, welcomes him, puts some cool clothes on him, gives him a ring, and throws a party. [If you have a Bible, you can read about it in Luke, chapter 15.] In this story, Jesus says we are like the son, and God is like the father. The only time in the entire Bible, as far as I know, where an image is used of God running, is when the father runs to the son. That is how God feels toward you. God’s arms are open, waiting for you, if only you will return to him, no matter how badly you have messed up your life.

GETTING REAL WITH GOD

You may be thinking, “How do I know all this God stuff is real?”

Just as no one is ever half-pregnant; either God exists or God does not exist. Either all of this stuff about God is true, or it is a bunch of bull. Correct?

How do I know God is real? Let me tell you two true stories which explain why I believe in God:

One night a woman brought her husband into the psychiatric hospital where I work. The man was as drunk as drunk could be. I asked him if he went to A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous]. He said, “No, I don’t believe in all that God stuff.” His wife said, “You should!” He responded, “I don’t believe there is a God.”—At that point I couldn’t resist, so I said, “I think there is an easy way to prove to you there is a God.” He took the bait, so I said, “See that picture behind you? . . . Would you believe me if I said there was an explosion at a paint factory and it blew paint

everywhere and just by chance made that painting?” He said, “No.” I asked, “Why not?” He said, “It couldn’t happen.”—“So, whenever you see design, there is usually a designer, or when you see art, there is usually an artist, right?” He said, “Yeah.” Then I said, “When you look at Cindy Crawford, the super model, or an Arabian stallion, a rose, or a New England Fall, do they look like something the universe puked out by accident, or does it look like there’s design?” He said, “Design.”—I said, “Then there must be a Designer, and that is God.” He said, “###*##, you got me!”

Whether it took God six days, or six billion years to create the universe, the point is, it would never happen by accident. Whether it takes an artist six hours or six years to complete a work of art, it is still a work of art; not a freak accident.

Let me give you another reason why I believe in God. Once a young man came to my wife and me. He said that he had become a Christian, but felt there were still demons in his life as a result of his being a former neo-Nazi (Skinhead), using drugs, having a “spirit guide”(a demon), using pornography, etc.

My wife and I agreed to pray with him. We asked the Lord to protect us, based on the fact that we, as children of God, outrank and have authority over demons. After praying I spoke to the first demon. I said, “If you are present, I know you can hear me. I outrank you, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, what is your name?”

All of a sudden the man began to convulse, the blood vessels on his neck stood out, his face turned red, his fingers curled up like claws, and he began to hiss and growl at me. (And yes it was scary.) One by one, as I addressed the demons, they revealed their true identity and, one by one, as the man told the Lord he was sorry for the sins, and asked God to forgive him, we commanded the demons to leave, and one by one they did.

While I was talking to one demon, the man looked up at me and said, “The demon wants to hurt you.” I told the demon, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to tell this person why he couldn’t hurt me. The man’s arms, controlled by the demon, pointed to the left, and the demon said, “Because of him!”—I looked and there was no one there. I said, “Who?” and the demon responded, “There is an angel standing there.”

Why do I believe in God? I have seen too many supernatural things not to believe in God. I know God exists. My head tells me it is true. My heart knows it is true. God has changed my life, and bottom line, faith in God works.

MAKING THINGS RIGHT

I don’t know what you did to get busted. That is none of my business. The point is, you need help. How many mud puddles have you gone through? How many layers of mud do you have on you? Feel how heavy it has become. Wouldn’t it be nice to be forgiven, and to feel light and clean for a change? Whatever crimes you have committed, you need to be forgiven (pardoned). You need to allow God to clean you up. Unless God forgives you, putting it bluntly, your life is screwed. God didn’t make you walk through those mud puddles. You chose to do it. While others may have splashed mud on you, it doesn’t excuse you for going through your own mud puddles and hurting others.

I’m going to make this simple, and tell it like it is. The Bible is God’s love letter to us. It a book of relationships. It teaches us how to love others, how to know and love God, how to love ourselves, and how to allow God to love us.

One reason I wrote this booklet is because it is important for you to begin to change your *thinking*. *Unless you change your thinking, you won’t change*.—Do you know why about 75% of all ex-cons return to prison a second, third, or fourth time? Their *thinking* hasn’t changed. They somehow think that if they keep doing the same dumb things over and over again, that somehow things will turn out different. That is crazy thinking. What you *think* [believe] determines how you will *behave* [act], and how you behave always has *consequences* [results]. Whenever you

choose a belief, or act a certain way, whether you like it or not, you are choosing the results which go with it. If you jump off a building, you can always expect to hit the ground. False and wrong beliefs lead to bad consequences.

Whether you consider yourself a religious person or not, I'd like to tell you how you can know God and his forgiveness.

Let me tell you a little story which makes the point I want to get across to you.

A young woman received a telephone call late one night from the emergency room of a hospital, telling her that her dad had had a serious heart attack and that he might have only a matter of hours to live. Because she lived a couple hundred miles away, she got in her car and began speeding across the state to see her father. As she was going through a small southern town, she looked in her rear view mirror, and there was a cop car chasing her. Because she was going so fast, the officer didn't merely give her a ticket, he arrested her. The next day she appeared before the local county judge who told her that for going 50 miles per hour above the speed limit, her fine would be \$300 or three days in jail. She pleaded with the judge. "Your honor, you don't understand, I don't have \$300 with me, and I can't spend three days in jail. I must go see my father who is dying." The judge said, "I'm sorry, young lady, but the law says you must pay \$300 or spend three days in jail."

As she began to weep, the judge was moved with compassion. To the surprise of everyone in the court, he stood up, stepped down from the bench, walked over, took off his robe, put on his sports coat, walked around in front of the bench, pulled out his checkbook, wrote a check for \$300, and laid it on the bench. Then he walked back around, took off his sports coat, put back on his robe, and resumed his seat. He said, "Young lady, the law is very clear. You must pay \$300 or spend three days in jail. But I see someone has paid the fine for you. Case dismissed."

God is like this judge. God took off his robe of deity [Godhood] and put on a coat of humanity and became a man in the person of Jesus Christ; then he died for you and me; paying a penalty we could never pay. I'd like to tell you about the real Jesus, the one who loved you and me enough to die for us. Christianity is not a *religion*, but a *relationship* with God, through Jesus Christ.

I will list where each idea is found in the Bible, so you can read each for yourself. [In case someone has never showed you, the Bible is like a bunch of small books, all in one big book. Each small book within the Bible has a name, and each book is divided into chapters, and each chapter is divided into verses. For example, John 3:16 means this verse is found in the book of John, the third chapter, the sixteenth verse.]

HOW YOU KNOW GOD

There are four spiritual truths you need to know in order to become free. These are like the A,B,C's of knowing God. If you're sick and tired of being sick and tired; tired of carrying the guilt, the shame, the dirty feelings, the anger, then pay attention to what I am about to share. It is truly good news.

Truth # 1. God loves you, and has a plan and purpose for your life.

God is a God of love [I John 4:16]. No matter how bad you've messed up your life, God still loves you [John 3:16]. He has a wonderful plan for your life [John 10:10, Ephesians 2:10]. What God wants for you is awesome beyond belief [Ephesians 3:14-21]. He can make all things work out for the good. [Romans 8:28]

Truth #2. Your sin has cut you off from God.

Why don't more people know God? The Bible says it is because our sin cuts us off from God who is holy [which means pure and without any sin—Isaiah 59:2; Romans 6:23]. Sin is rebelling, not obeying God. It is like shooting at God's target and missing. Because God is pure and blameless, totally without sin [Isaiah 6:1-5, I John 1:5], we cannot just walk into God's presence.

Just as you would not allow someone to walk on your expensive white carpet if he had oily, muddy shoes, neither will God allow sin in Heaven. If we went to Heaven as we are now, we would mess up Heaven, just as we have the earth.

The Bible says we have all failed God's test, and we deserve to go to Hell. If we all lined up in front of the Grand Canyon, and tried to jump across it, some might jump further than others; but the point is, we would all fall short. [Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:23; Romans 1:18]. Because Adam and Eve [the first man and first woman] chose to sin, the Bible teaches that their sin nature got passed on to all people; the same way you inherited stuff from your parents [Genesis 3; Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12-21].

We are all guilty before God, whether we have sinned a little or a lot [James 2:10].—It is like the man who said, "*But, Judge, look at all the people I didn't kill.*"—The point? None of us deserves to go to Heaven. Scripture teaches that we have all sinned against an eternal God and committed eternal crimes. [Romans 3:23; 6:23]—Stating it bluntly, unless God forgives us, we're all doomed to live in Hell. Because God is a good and honest judge, he cannot just sweep our sins under the rug.

Truth # 3. Christ died for you and he is the only way to God.

Just as the judge in the story I told a couple of pages back paid the penalty for the woman caught speeding, Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin [II Thessalonians 1:8-9; John 3:16; Romans 5:8, Acts 20:28]. He is the bridge that connects a holy God with sinful man. Either we go to God through him, or we do not get to God [ITimothy 2:5]. The Bible says that the penalty for sin is death [Romans 6:23]. When we stood guilty and condemned before God, without hope, deserving death and Hell, God took off his robe of deity [Godhood], put on a robe of humanity, became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, and died for you. God did for you what you could never do for yourself [Romans 5:6]. According to scripture, Jesus is both God and man. He has two natures: one human, the other God [Philippians 2:6,7 and Romans 1:3,4]. If God has forgiven you for your sins, when you stand before God as Judge, you will be standing before the very One who loved you and paid the fine for you.—Case dismissed [Romans 8:1].

Truth # 4. You must receive God's gift of forgiveness.

Knowing the first three principles is not enough. It takes a response on our part. While we cannot earn salvation [Isaiah 64:6; Ephesians 2:8-9], it is a *gift* which must be received. John 1:12 says, "*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*"—How do you *receive* the gift of salvation?

Since it is our sins which have been keeping us from God, we must be willing to turn from our sin [Mark 1:14,15]. The Bible calls this *repentance*, which simply means to *turn around*.—For example, if you are on the wrong bus heading away from God, you need to change buses, and get on board with Christ. Or, putting it another way, if you have been driving your own bus, it means being willing to get out of the driver's seat, and inviting Jesus to take over as your bus driver. He can turn your life around, and get you going in the right direction.

The Bible says that if you will confess [admit] your sins, no matter how great or small they are, God will forgive you [Isaiah 1:18; I John 1:9]. The moment you do this you are totally forgiven. Your sins will *never* be held against you [Romans 4:7,8]. Don't you wish you could stand the judge who put you in prison totally forgiven? Well, with God when you stand before him on judgment day, if you've received forgiveness in Jesus, you will stand there totally cleared of all charges. Jesus will be your defense attorney, and he will tell God, the Judge, "This person's crimes have all been paid in full."

The story is told of a man who tight-rope walked across Niagara Falls with a 200 pound sack of sand on his back. Upon walking to the other side he turned to a spectator and asked, "Do you believe I could do that again?" The person said "Sure!" The tight-rope walker tossed down the

sand and said, “Then climb on my back.”—Real believing is more than talking the talk; it is walking the walk. God asks you to “climb on board,” and commit yourself to him. It is more than believing something to be true in your head. It is a commitment of the heart.

As an act of faith, in order to become a Christian, you must invite Jesus to come into your life to be your Savior and Lord. [*Savior* refers to the fact that he *saves* us from our sin, and *Lord* simply means *boss*, the One in charge.] It means getting out of the driver’s seat, and letting him be in the driver’s seat of your life.

Once you do this, not only are you forgiven, but God places his Holy Spirit within you. [Ephesians 1:7-14, Galatians 2:20]. You become a child of God.

Let me share a simple illustration. Would you go to a stranger’s funeral and ask the family of the deceased for a share of the inheritance? You could tell them, “I’m a *good person*, and I do nice things for others.”—Would that impress them? No. They’d say, “I’m sorry, but the inheritance is for family members only. We don’t even know you.”

Well, the same is true with God. You must be born into God’s family if you expect to *inherit* what is God’s. His inheritance is for his children, for those who *know* him. That is why Jesus said unless a person is *born again*, he or she will never see the Kingdom of Heaven [John 3:3-18]. The moment you receive Christ into your life, you are spiritually reborn into God’s family. You become a joint heir with Christ [Romans 8:32]. You inherit eternal life, and glory beyond your wildest imagination awaits you [I Corinthians 2:9; 3:21-23; Ephesians 1:3; Romans 8:31,32].

If you do what God tells you to do for salvation, you can *know* and rest assured you are a child of God; that when you die you will go to Heaven, and will live with God forever [John 14:1,2; Revelation 21:1-4]. I John 5:11-13 says, “*And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may KNOW you have eternal life.*” [emphasis mine]—How can you *know* for sure that you will go to Heaven? Does it depend on how you feel? No. If you do what God says, believe in Christ, God will hold up his end of the bargain. God does not lie.

The Bible says that if you pray and ask for *anything* according to God’s will, He will answer you [I John 5:14].—Is it God’s will that you *believe* in and *receive* Jesus? Yes. [See: II Peter 3:9.] Therefore, when you ask God to forgive you and come into your life, you can count on it [Romans 10:9, Ephesians 3:17].

Speaking for myself, I came to know Jesus when I was 14 years old. I prayed and asked him to come into my life, and forgive me of my sins.—And he did. It was that simple. To my amazement, it worked. God’s peace flooded through me. Old feelings of guilt were gone [II Corinthians 5:17]. As I read the Bible, it finally began to make sense. I also began seeing God answer prayer, which totally surprised me. God became real to me. While being a Christian has not always been easy, I wouldn’t trade the joy of knowing Christ for anything in the world.

Christianity isn’t simply a religion; it is a relationship with the living God. God doesn’t want you to merely believe he exists. He wants you to *know* him, and for you to love him. Like a lover of your soul, God has proposed to you. The question is, will you say, “I do”?

A TIME OF DECISION

If you feel the Spirit of God speaking to you, and you become convinced in your heart, and in your mind, that what I have written is true, then you face a decision.

No matter how many reasons I give you for believing in Jesus, the final step is one of faith; even though there are good reasons for our belief. For example, I can’t *prove* that George Washington lived, but I can show a lot of evidence that he did. By *faith*, I believe George Washington lived, and by *faith*, I believe Christianity is true. Faith in Jesus works. I know. Jesus changed my life.

A simple way for you to see if what I say is true, is for you to seek God on His terms [as best

you understand], with a will to follow the truth. Not to seek God with all of your heart is to gamble with losing your soul. Choosing not to decide is a decision. To do nothing is the same as saying “No.”

You may want to pray something like this, “*Dear Lord God, if You’re there, and what this booklet says is true about Jesus, then I want to know. Please show me the truth.*”—Praying this prayer will not make you a Christian, but it is an honest start.

Then, read.—Read the Bible. Don’t just rely on what you have heard. Study it for yourself. Look up the verses in this booklet. Think with your mind; listen with your heart. There are good answers to about any question you can ask.

Someday you will stand before God, either forgiven or unforgiven. Hell is one of those hard teachings most Christians, myself included, don’t like to discuss. However, Jesus talked about it more than all the other Bible writers put together. Not to choose God, and not to accept his offer of forgiveness, is to choose a life of eternal separation from Him [Daniel 12:2; Revelation 20:11-15; II Thessalonians 1:8-9; Matthew 13:40-43]. God is serious when it comes to sin. God judges sin. If you refuse God’s forgiveness, and you hang onto your sin, you will die with your sin. If there were any other way, Jesus would not have had to die on the cross. Scripture says, “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*” [Acts 4:12]. Either you go through Jesus, or you don’t go to Heaven.

The Bible teaches that when people die, they either go to Heaven or to Hell. Hell is God’s prison. Once a person goes there, it is a life sentence that never ends. God is a God of love, but he is also a God of justice and he hates evil. For those who refuse to give up their evil, they will go down with that evil, just like a person refusing to get off the Titanic.

There is no sin too great for God to forgive. He loves you. He died for you. Whatever you have done, whatever guilt you are carrying, God is willing to forgive. God does not lie. He promises to forgive you *if* you will but ask [Isaiah 1:18; I John 1:9]. He will give you the strength to overcome any sin [I Corinthians 10:13; Philippians 4:13]. With God’s Spirit living in and through you, you can begin to experience God’s peace and joy [John 14:27; Galatians 2:20, 5:22; Romans 7:14-8:11].

This may be a hard decision for you. Much is at stake. If you receive Jesus, it will cost you. You may be misunderstood. Friends and family members may reject you.—Welcome to the club. Jesus was also misunderstood and rejected.—He was willing to die for you. Are you willing to live for him?

No one has a deciding vote in this decision but you. God votes for you. Satan, who is also very real, votes against you. I pray that you will vote before it is too late. There are no second chances in another life [Hebrews 9:27].—The question is whether you are willing to receive him and give your life to him. Jesus said, “*Here I am! I stand at the door [of your heart] and knock. If anyone [you] hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in . . .*” Revelation 3:20.

If you know that what I have said is true, then find a quiet place and make your peace with God. Invite Jesus into your life. What greater joy could you have than to know your sins are forgiven, that you have been given eternal life, and that you are ready to meet Jesus when he returns [Zechariah 14:1-9; I John 3:1-3].

When you are ready to make your peace with God, I suggest you pray something like this: “*Dear Jesus, I thank you for loving me. I am sorry for the ways that I have sinned against you. I believe you died on the cross for my sin. As best as I know how, right now, I invite you to come into my life. Please forgive me, and cleanse me, from all my sin. Make me the person you want me to be. I need you. Thank you for hearing my prayer. Amen.*”

These words are not magical. The important thing is that you mean them.

The story is told of a man whose wife had died and he had an only son whom he loved. The man was an art collector, and over the years had bought millions of dollars worth of paintings. He had every intention of giving them to his son. However, the Viet Nam War came along, the son got drafted, and was killed in the war. The father sank into a deep depression which lasted for a

couple of years. Then, one day, there was a knock at the door. The old man opened the door, and there at the door was a long-haired, hippy-looking guy holding a painting.

The young man spoke, "You do not know me, but I served in Viet Nam with your son. In fact, if it weren't for him I would not be here today, for you see, he gave his life saving mine. Now, I'm not much of an artist, but while I was in Nam I painted a portrait of your son, and I'd like you to have it."—The father looked at the painting, and while it wasn't great art, it caught the likeness of the son. His depression lifted. He liked the painting so well that he took down a piece of art above his fireplace, valued at thousands of dollars, and hung the son's picture there. Every time he looked at it, it brought joy to his heart.

With time, the old gentleman also died. Because there was no one to leave the estate to, art collectors from all around the world came to bid on the priceless paintings to be sold at auction. The first painting to be auctioned was the painting of the son. People said, "We don't want to buy that. Give us the good stuff." The auctioneer said, "No, it was in the father's will that this is to be the first painting auctioned off."—There was silence. No one bid. Finally, the old gardener spoke, "I worked for the master for many years, and I loved the son. He was like a son to me. I'm not rich, but I'll gladly bid \$20."

As there were no more bids, the auctioneer said, "Going, going, gone! The auction is now over."

Gasps of surprise and protest went throughout the room as people said, "This can't be! We came to bid on the other paintings." The auctioneer said, "It was written in the father's will that 'whoever receives my son, receives it all.'"

If you prayed to receive Jesus, you receive it all. John 1:12 say, "Yet to all who received him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he (God) gave the right to become children of God . . ." [parenthesis mine: See I John 5:11-15 also.] When you become a child of God, all that is God's is now yours [I Corinthians 3:21-23].

Once you have invited Jesus Christ to be a part of your life, I encourage you to go to any Protestant chapel services or Bible studies in your jail/prison. Ask your chaplain if the group, Prison Fellowship, conducts meetings at your facility. If they do, then by all means go. If you can, get baptized to show you are a Christian [Matthew 28:19,20; Acts 10:47, 48a]. Continue to pray, read the Bible, and allow God to speak to you.

Life is hard, but God is good. There are spiritual battles that will go on in your life. Just as God and angels are real, Satan and his demons are also real. The New Testament has much to say about them. Even if you are not used to reading a lot, now is a good time to begin to grow your mind. Many of the hardest battles you will fight are between your ears: your mind.

There are many good Christian books to read. I'd try Christian authors such as Charles Swindoll and Max Lucado. Ask your prison chaplain if he/she has any books by these authors which you can borrow.

Let me end with the following story: The tale is told of a native witch doctor who had done much evil in his life, causing much needless suffering through his beliefs. As a result of the love and work of some Christian workers, this witch doctor invited Jesus into his heart. He called a meeting to share with those in his village the changes that had occurred in his life. He told them that before he came to know Christ, it was as though there was an evil dog in him that made him do cruel, hateful things. When he asked Christ into his life, he said it was as though a powerful good dog of love and peace came to live in him.

As he spoke, a small lad sitting at his feet grew more and more interested in what he was saying. When the lad couldn't take the suspense any longer, he blurted out, "Did the bad dog leave?" The former witch doctor paused and said, "No, son, he still hangs around." The boy asked "How do the two dogs get along?" The old man replied, "They fight all the time!" The little boy, with great concern in his voice said, "Well, which one wins?" The old man, with a smile and a twinkle in his eyes said, "The one I feed the most."—How true.

Keep feeding the good side. May you know his love and peace.

LIST OF SOME IMPORTANT SCRIPTURES

- **Romans 6:23**—“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- **Isaiah 59:2**—“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”
- **II Thessalonians 1:8-9**—“He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed . . .”
- **John 3:16**— “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
- **Romans 5:8**—“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
- **Romans 3:23**—“. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . .”
- **I John 1:9**—“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
- **John 1:12**—“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God . . .”
- **Revelation 3:20**—“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.”
- **Romans 5:8**—“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
- **Ephesians 1:7-14**—(too lengthy to quote)
- **Galatians 2:20**— “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”
- **Ephesians 2:8-9**—“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”
- **II Corinthians 5:17**—“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”
- **Revelation 20:11-15**—“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”
- **Matthew 13:40-43**—“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”
- **ICorinthians 10:13**—“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”
- **Romans 14:23**—“. . . everything that does not come from faith is sin.”
- **Philippians 4:13**—“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”
- **Galatians 5:22**—“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control . . .”

- **Romans 7:14-8:11 (too lengthy to quote)**
- **Hebrews 9:27**—“Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment. . .”
- **IJohn 5:11-13**—“And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may **know** that you have eternal life.”(emphasis mine)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This booklet is one of several booklets in a series defending the Christian faith, written by myself. You can read or download any of the booklets off the internet at: <http://www.Crosslink.com>.

Due to the potential risk to my family by religious groups violently opposed to Christianity, such as some Muslim extremists and Satanists, I have chosen to write all booklets in this series under the pen name, Timothy Cross. I am willing to die for my faith, should it come to that; I just don't want to speed up the process.

Why did I choose the name Timothy Cross? Because it was *Timothy* who was told by the apostle Paul to guard the gospel [II Timothy 1:13,14]. And, what is the central message of the gospel? It is the *cross* of Jesus Christ [ICorinthians 1:18-2:2]. Further, by writing under a pen name, it takes the focus off me and puts it where it should be, upon the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Jesus Christ and him alone. As Titus 2:13 says, Jesus is our glorious “*God and Savior*.”

So you know a little about me, I am an evangelical Christian. I work primarily as a chaplain with a hospice [terminally ill patients], and in a psychiatric hospital. On more than one occasion, I have worked closely with Josh McDowell [Campus Crusade For Christ]. I became a Christian through Youth For Christ [Campus Life] in high school, and was very involved with Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship as a student in college. I have always attended churches which are evangelical and interdenominational in flavor [e.g. Evangelical Free Church, Evangelical Covenant Church, Great Commission Ministries, etc.].

I hope this booklet helps you discover and walk in the awesome truth that, not only does God exist, but you are awesomely loved by God.

With deepest respect,

Timothy Cross

“ . . . in love he claims all.”—C.S. Lewis